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LATIN VERSIONS OF TWO POEMS OF CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ

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Abstract

Latin Versions of Two Poems of Czesław Miłosz

The main aim of the paper is to present the translations of two poems written by Czesław Miłosz from English into Latin (*Accurata descriptio mei ipsius*, *De Angelis*). Each of Latin translation is provided with detailed notes and commentaries which bring information about the linguistic choices made by the interpreter. The notes are also useful in spelling out the sense of Miłosz's verses. Explaining the choice of elegiac verse for rendition of the two poems, the author indicates numerous analogies between Ovid and Miłosz in perceiving and describing the world, human nature, and desires.
The short interview with the interpreter (conducted by Elwira Buszewicz) might be regarded as the author's *post scriptum* to his translations of Miłosz's poems and notes on each of them. He tells about motivation for translating contemporary poetry into Latin, his beginnings in writing Latin poetry, and Miłosz's poetry. Two poems written by the Polish poet and translated by Lee into Latin appear to have been composed by Ovid himself. The historical and cultural distance between those two poets seems to become temporarily irrelevant. Then, the only thing that has sense is the truth of poetical revelation.

Key words: contemporary poetry in Latin, Czesław Miłosz, Ovidian style, translation, paraphrase

Accurata descriptio mei ipsius tenentis vischii calicem in aëroportu puta Minneapolensi.
Carmen poetae Czeslaw Milosz epigrammatice redditum MMII et emendatum MMXI

Vix capiunt aures aliquando verba loquentis;
  lumina languescunt, prompta sed usque manent.
crura mihi tenuis bombyx et lina revelant;
  intueor clunes, crura tenella, femur.
quamque avidus spectans fabellis sedor amorum
  quas petulans olim mi Cytherea dedit.
'Foede senex! decuit iuvenum te linquere ludos;
  ilia nam desunt, Orcus et ipse vocat.'
ut semper sed ago, varias qui pingere mundi
  effigies suevi quas iubet alma Venus.
quas modo spectavi, tenues sunt exstasis umbrae,
  nec magis has ipsas, omne sed aequus amo.
nempe biformis homo est, animo coniuncta cupido
  ut satyro nais, nec (puto) culpa mea est.
cum superis, ut nunc, forsan quandoque morabor
  (quae faciunt homines, haec facienda diis);
non ibi sed pondus grave erit nec sensus hebescet –
  corpore deposito nil nisi visus ero.
tunc hominum repetam facies irisque colores,
  Parisii tactas Luciferoque vias.
visibilis mundi quisnam spectacula cepit?
  nec mihi versiculus, nec tibi vita satis.

Notes

v. 2 – *lumina* = *oculi* (as often in verse).
v. 3 – *bombyx* for *bombycinae vestes* (metonymy, singular for plural).
v. 4 – *femur* = *femora* (singular for plural).
v. 6 – *Cytherea* = *Venus*.
v. 11 – *exstasis umbrae*: "shadows of the ecstasy;" cf. John Henry Newman's epitaph, *ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*.
v. 13 – *animo*: dative.
v. 17 – *non … pondus grave*: oxymoron.
v. 19 – *facies*: "shapes, forms;" *irisque*: the regular genitive of *iris* is *iridis*. The genitive *iris* is listed in Lewis and Short's *A Latin Dictionary*, but no reference is given; *florumque* would be a possible alternative.

v. 20 – *Parisii*: the second vowel is usually long but scans here as short, a deviation attested in later writers like Ausonius. Allowed as an alternative by Noël.
v. 21 – *tactas Lucifero*: "touched by the morning star" i.e. by the dawn.

De Angelis.

Carmen poetae Czeslaw Milosz epigrammatice redditum MMII et emendatum MMXI

Omnia adempta tibi – lyra, pennae, candida vestis,
vita – tamen credo, nuntius, usque tibi;
nam spatiare illic, inverso tegmine mundi,
textile qua pictum est sidere, luce, feris;
aetherii fidas suturas inspicis orbis
perpetuo vigilans, hic brevius sed iter:
mane soles olim cum sudum est visere pratum
cum liquidum repetit dulcis alauda melos;
vespera prima rubens laetos cum fascinat hortos
detegit in pomis te mihi suavis odor.
historias dicunt aliquem finxisse deorum,
sed dubito, quoniam se quoque finxit homo.
indicium vox est, quam non emittere possis
ni levis et fulgens sis, similisque diis;
saepius in somnis mandata precesque susurras,
quas capio, quamvis vox aliena mihi est:
'terrigenis tristis reditura est cura diei:
quod potes hoc facias, quod patet hoc et agas.'

Notes

v. 2 – *vita*: "existence;" *nuntius*: vocative; *credo ... tibi*: "I believe you."
v. 3–4 – "For, with the covering of the world turned inside out, you stroll in the place where a tapestry has been embroidered with constellations, light and wild beasts." On this interpretation the *tegmen mundi* is distinct from the *textile*: the *tegmen* might be a dome or other structure into which the

tapestry has been incorporated; *sidere*: "constellations" (singular for plural). (The ablatives in line 4 are instrumental.)

v. 5 – *fidas suturas*: "the trustworthy seams."

v. 7 – *cum sudum est*: "when the weather is fine."

v. 9 – *fascinat*: "bewitches, casts a spell over."

v. 10 – "The sweet smell in the apples reveals you to me."

v. 11–12 – "They say that someone has made up the stories of the gods, but I wonder about this, because man has also invented himself." That is, even if transcendent beings are figments of someone's imagination, we are still left with the uncomfortable fact that men, too, are figments of their own imagination. There seems to be a deliberate paradox here, since any theory that humans are themselves figments of human imagination assumes that there are humans who are doing the imagining. I don't know what Milosz's answer to this would be.

v. 16 – *quas capio*: "which I catch hold of," "which I experience."

v. 17–18 – There is in this couplet a good deal of padding, but, for one thing, a couplet was demanded by the metre, and, for another, there is a problem about how to interpret the terse directive of the original: "Day draws near, another one, do what you can." Line 17 is an addition of my own, but it pushes the angel's advice in the direction of "Life is pretty beastly and difficult, but get on with things as well as you can." A rather different reading of Milosz might be something like: "Be an active, committed moral agent, join the protestors at the barricades and stand up to your oppressors." It might have been nice if the "voice" had been a bit more informative.

v. 18 – *facias* here = *fac*. "Do this thing which you are able to do, this thing which is open to you."

De Angelis, like the original "On Angels," puts one in mind of a number of English poems which might be termed "poems of intimation," for example William Blake's poem "Night" and Francis Thompson's "The Kingdom of God." To go somewhat farther afield, readers of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's letters might like to compare the last letter he wrote to his fiancée before his death.

On the singular *nuntius* instead of *nuntii*, see the remarks on prosody below.

Translator's Note

Earlier versions of these Latin translations of two poems by Czeslaw Milosz can be found on the *Poesis Latina Hodierna* webpage. It is a matter of some regret that I have had to use English translations of the Polish originals as the basis of my work, but it should be noted that Milosz himself translated *On Angels* into English and also gave his approval to the English version of *An Honest Description*...

Both poems seem to me eminently suitable for rendition into Latin elegiac verse. "An Honest Description" might almost have come from a lost fragment of the *Ars Amatoria*. Just as, for Ovid, the colonnades and arches of Augustan Rome seemed purpose-built for lovers, so for Milosz, the lounges of the great airports are the ideal spot, if one is in the mood, for surreptitious girl-watching. Both poets are masters of the light touch, and both are politically incorrect. As Ovid targets the official selfrighteousness of Augustan Rome, nowhere better expressed than in Horace's patriotic *Delicta Maiorum* (*Carm*.III.vi), so does Milosz seem to attack the norms of modern-day feminism: the old lecher should, according to the poet's politically correct self, be ashamed of his attitude, but the poet offers in reply the brute fact of human nature as a complex of intellect and desire, and the dependence of art on the erotic impulse; maybe creativity will be more detached in a life beyond, but for now we're stuck with the heavy bones, dull senses and carnal desires. *On Angels* is a beautiful little poem, both in its imagery and in its wistful longing for a transcendence of which we have only vague and tentative intimations, the sort of poem which Ausonius, a later master of elegiac verse, might well have been pleased to own.

On prosody, I have tried to be as "Ovidian" as possible, my main guides being Maurice Platnauer's *Latin Elegiac Verse* (Cambridge Unversity Press, Cambridge 1951) and F. Noël's *Gradus ad Parnassum* (Hachette, Paris 1883). I have also opted for classical rather than neo-Latin words, e.g. for *tenuis bombyx et lina* ("gauzy silks and linens") instead of "miniskirts and slacks." Regrettably there is, *metri gratia*, only one angel in the second poem; I hope that he (or she) won't be lonely.

A brief interview with the translator:

Elwira Buszewicz: What is your motivation for translating contemporary poetry into Latin?

John Lee: I just don't know. Why do people collect stamps or catch butterflies or do crosswords? Sixty years ago in Australia I was taught Latin, in particular Virgil, Catullus, Horace and Lucretius by a professor who not only brought Latin verse alive, but was also an excellent teacher of Latin metre and prosody. Most of my interest in Latin poetry is due to that man. At Oxford there was very little verse in the "Lit. Hum." course of the time (early 1960s) – the set texts were Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Ethics*, Cassius Dio, lots of Cicero etc. (The Oxford Classics course today has a lot more options; the one I took was devised in the 19th century). When I became a lecturer I taught Philosophy, including Greek Philosophy, from texts in English. For a few years we had an intake of Catholic seminarians from a local seminary, and we went through some of the *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas in Latin, but that was only for a brief period.

E.B.: What were your beginnings in writing Latin poetry?

J.L.: When the Internet came along (for me, in about 2000) I looked to see whether anyone was writing Latin verse. I already knew of two books of the 1950s and 1960s called *Some Oxford Compositions* and *More Oxford Compositions* (Oxford University Press). These books, which are now long out of print, contain a lot of Latin and Greek versions of English poems. I had also got a copy of Alexander Lenard's Latin version of A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, titled *Winnie Ille Pu*. On the Internet I discovered The Latin Library, which has the poems of Alexander Smarius and Brad Walton. I read Smarius's *Laura* poems with great enjoyment and even put some into English verse. (I had previously been translating into English some of Books 13–14 of Martial, the *Xenia* and *Apophoreta*). Later I found *Poesis Latina Hodierna* and the Latin poems of Martin Freundorfer (the winner of a Papal prize for Latin verse) and many others. Ten years ago I didn't think I could write Latin verse, but I wrote to Brad Walton at *PLH*

and obtained a copy of his notes on Latin Verse Composition. I now think that some of my early stuff, while technically OK, is not very good.

E.B.: What kind of a poet is Miłosz in your opinion? Is it easy to classify him?

J.L. : I first met Miłosz's verse through *The New York Review of Books* – it was there that I first read *An Honest Description* and his prose poem in memory of Christopher Robin Milne. I think he contributed a fair bit to the NYRB in his last years. Is Milosz a Christian poet? Well, maybe yes and maybe no. By all accounts he was in later life a Christian (I've seen the pictures of his funeral in Krakow), so yes, he was a Christian who was also a poet, and you can see *On Angels* perhaps getting into an anthology of Christian verse. But he's not a Christian poet in the way (or ways?) that Venantius, Godescalc, George Herbert or G.M. Hopkins were. One of our Australian historians was asked, not long before he died, whether he believed in heaven and the afterlife; he replied that he had a "shy hope" of heaven (like Milosz, he had a Catholic funeral). *On Angels* seems to me to be a "shy hope" poem about transcendence ("shy" as implying "it could well be right, but don't hold me to it").

E.B.: *What would you like to tell about yourself?*

J.L. : If you want a note on me, you could just say that I am retired, write Latin verse as a hobby and previously taught philosophy at an Australian university. My email address is on the *Poesis Latina Hodierna* webpage.